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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 509TH PARACHUTE BATTALION (SEPARATE
UNIT) IN NORTH AFRICA, 8 NOVEMBER 1942 - FEBRUARY 1943
(ALGERIAN FRENCH MOROCCA - TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: FIRST PARACHUTE OPERATIONS
ATTEMPTED BY THE U. S. ARMY

Captain Lloyd G. Wilson, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION 509TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY
IN NORTH AFRICA, 8 NOVEMBER 1942 - FEBRUARY 1943
ALGERIA - FRENCH MOROCCO AND TUNISIAN CAMPAIGNS
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIT

The first parachute mission in the history of the United States Army was assigned to the 2nd Battalion 503rd Parachute Infantry* to be accomplished on 8 November 1942.

In order to familiarize the reader, very briefly, with the background of the unit concerned in this monograph, it will be necessary to begin with the date the unit first landed in England from the United States.

Having landed in England on the 11 June 1942, the battalion was one of the first American combat units to appear in the European Theater of Operations during World War II. (1) Since the Theater Headquarters and supply bases were in the early planning stages, the unit was placed under a British Airborne Division commanded by Major General F.A.M. Browning, DSO, for subsistence and operations and training. The training

(1) B-3, p. 16.

*The 2nd Battalion 503rd Parachute Infantry was redesignated as the 2nd Battalion 509th Parachute Infantry shortly after the invasion of Northwest Africa. The change was in name only; personnel assignments were not altered. The 2nd Battalion was later changed to the 1st Battalion. There was only one activated battalion in the 509th Parachute Infantry during World War II. Captain Hugh DeLurry, 01283038, who was captured after a jump with the battalion behind the German lines at Salerno, Italy, was taken to an interrogation center in Frankfurt, Germany. Captain DeLurry was subjected to considerable torture in the hands of the enemy interrogators because he refused to answer one question that seemed rather important to the Germans and one that had them puzzled. The question was, "What happened to the 503rd Parachute Battalion that landed in England in June 1942." (Personal statement of Captain DeLurry).

included valuable lessons learned by the British in the Brunel raid (2) and also a course in the British Commando School near Ilfracombe. During this phase of training, certain elements of the battalion were briefed and held in readiness for the Dieppe raid. Later changes in the plans cancelled the paratroop participation. (3)

The Battalion Commander was given a mission; which later turned out to be the participation in the invasion of North West Africa, about six weeks before "D"-Day. Complete details on all phases of the operation were given to the Battalion staff, then to the Company Commanders, platoon leaders, non-coms and privates respectively. Every man in the unit knew every last minute detail of the operation except the country in which it was to take place--some believed it would be Norway. The complete situation of the actual mission to be accomplished was set up on similar terrain in England and every man in the battalion rehearsed so thoroughly and often, that each could have played his role blindfolded. (4)

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The occupation of North Africa was important to the Allied Force for a number of reasons: (1) It would open the Mediterranean Sea and facilitate Allied global operations. (2) it would remove the threat of German activities in

(2) B-3, P. 18; (3) B-5, p. 1; (4) B-3 Ch.4, B-8, p.1-2

Western Morocco and (3) at Dakar it would add to the security of the Allied position while building up the necessary strength for further operations. (4) A setting would be provided for the reorganization of the French Army for the ultimate return to the homeland. (5) The conquest of North Africa would produce a tremendous psychological effect. (5)

The Germans did not occupy the whole of France, Algeria and French Morocco upon the Armistice of 1940, because they did not wish to tie up troops needed elsewhere, with garrison duties. They hoped for complete collaboration from Vichy. For two and one-half years the Germans kept believing that complete collaboration could soon be effected and consequently occupation was substituted for by Fifth Column activities. It is believed the Germans failed to anticipate the Allied invasion of North Africa due to being deceived by their own propaganda on the success of their U-boat campaign. They believed the necessary shipping was not available to the Allies. (6)

The remark has often been made that had the Allies invaded Tunis and Bizerte, the War in North Africa would have been greatly shortened. The reason the continent was invaded at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers can best be explained by the lessons learned from previous operations in Norway. It was learned that a small landing party on hostile territory in the face of enemy air superiority could not be maintained. Tunis and Bizerte were known to be powerful fortresses. A

(5) B-2, p. 18; (6) B-4, p. 78-79

landing party would probably have been expelled by enemy airborne forces from nearby Sicily, or by a hostile French force before the main forces could be put ashore. If serious French resistance had materialized, the maintaining and guarding of a large number of widely spaced landing points would have exposed the whole Allied force to the risk of detailed defeat. The Straits of Gibraltar would have been a very slim assurance of a supply route if French opposition had developed and the German occupation of Spain accomplished.

(7)

THE FIRST MISSION

As the uncertain political situation indicates, the Allies could not accurately decide whether or not to expect resistance from the French Forces in Northwest Africa. Two plans were prepared; "War" and "Peace". For all planning and training purposes, the unit commander adopted the "War" plan.

(8) The battalion was to become a part of the Center Task Force commanded by Major General Lloyd R. Fredendall. The missions of the Center Task Force, as assigned by the Chief of Allied Forces (Lt Gen Eisenhower) were briefly as follows:

(1) to occupy the part of Oran and adjacent airfield; (2) establish and maintain communications with the Western Task Force at Casablanca and mutually build up air and ground striking forces ready to contain Spanish Morocco if necessary; and (3) establish and maintain communications between Oran and Orleansville. (9)

(7) B-4, p.81-82; (8) B-7, p.1-2; (9) B-6, p.64

Under the "War" plan, the Parachute Battalion was given the mission of capturing the LaSenia and Tarafoui Airports a few miles inland from Oran. Take-off time from the designated airports in England would be at such time as to enable the parachutists to descend on the objective at 0100 hours, 8 November 1942. If the "peace" plan was in force, the take-off time would be at such time as to enable the unit to land by plane on the airport at 0530 (daylight) on the same date. (10) The distance to be flown by the parachutists before the mission could be accomplished was approximately 1500 miles. (11)

Every officer and enlisted man was fully aware that the mission assigned was going to be a difficult one to accomplish. In addition to being the first operation of its kind in the history of the Army, the distance involved, and the unstable political situation made the operation extremely complex. There were no training manuals or historical accounts published that could be used for reference. Everyone was conscious of the fact that army history was being written and that the principles of airborne warfare, to be used in many subsequent operations, would be laid down. The first example had to be set on the methods of employment of airborne troops and an important mission was to be accomplished. (12)

In moving the battalion from the base camp to the marshalling area, every possible caution was taken to maintain secrecy. All patches, badges, and other equipment that could be used to identify a unit as parachutists was put under cover.

(10) B-7, p. 1-2; (11) B-2, p. 20; (12) Personal

Security rules were so strict that the men were not even allowed to discuss any military subject outside of the training area. A scheme was used to prevent even the civilian population in the immediate area of the base camp from knowing when the battalion departed. A small group of rifle elements that had joined the battalion in August 1942 were left in the area with instructions to let themselves be seen by the local people during the immediate following days. The move was so cleverly handled, that very few of the civilian inhabitants in the area ever got suspicious. (13A)

The entire battalion was secretly assembled on the air-dromes of St Eual and Prelernack located on Lands End in England. The troops and all equipment were loaded on 39 C-47 transport aircraft of the 60th Troop Carrier Group. (13) The troops very tensely waited for a very important signal from Gibraltar. If the words "Advance Alexis" were not radioed by 1630, 7 November, Africa would be entered in peace. The time came and passed away without word from Gibraltar. Everyone gave a big sigh of relief; the "peace plan" was in effect. A hearty welcome was visioned at LaSenia and Tarafoui. Thoughts were directed toward a mission at Tunis or perhaps Bone. (14)

The take-off began at 2130 and by 2200 all aircraft were headed toward Africa. Soon after take-off, a heavy fog was encountered. The formation began to break up in order

(13) B-7, p. 2; (13A) B-8, p.2, B-5, p.1; (14) B-3, p.30

to avoid mid-air clashes. The troops had a hearty meal and later settled down and slept. By dawn the next morning the formation was so scattered that the largest single group of planes consisted of six aircraft. Over half the planes did not know their position and several of the others could only give an approximation of their location. Only eleven out of the 39 airplanes flew directly to their objective. Three planes landed in Spanish Morocco, due to the shortage of fuel, and the personnel were interned, (14A) one landed in Gibraltar due to engine trouble, two landed on LaSenia Airport and the personnel imprisoned; one southeast of Oran and the remainder landed in the Sebkra, a dry lake bed about thirty miles west of Terafoul. The first planes to reach the vicinity of the objective noted that the airport was being bombed and were met with AA fire; other planes were fired at by French fighters. The personnel in all aircraft were soon aware that something had gone wrong in the plans. All planes in the vicinity proceeded to land in the Sebkra due to the acute shortage of fuel. (15)

Colonel Raff, the Battalion Commander, came over the Sebkra leading a group of five aircraft. The personnel could be seen abandoning the landed planes below. The pilot of the Colonel's plane received a timely radio message to the effect that the planes and troops were being fired upon by an armored column from a nearby road. The Colonel could see a motorized

(14A) Personal Statement of Capt Fred E. Perry and Capt Hugh DeLurry, 01283038; (15) B-7, p. 3.

column from his position in the plane. He immediately located a drop zone and summoned the personnel in the five aircraft to jump and attack the column. On the ground, the "chutists" sneaked upon the column to discover that all vehicles bore a large white star on the side. They were a part of an American Armored Column that had broken through at Oran in the early morning. (16)

In the absence of further instructions it was decided that the battalion would move to the south side of the Sebkra and from there, advance on to the airfields by foot to assist in the capture. The march across the lake bed was one of the toughest marches ever made by the men in the battalion. The semi-desert heat, the sticky mud, the fatigue-ing plane ride from England and the winter clothing with heavy underwear were not favorable factors to long, hard marching. The battalion had become so efficient in training marches that twenty-five miles in eight hours could be stepped off with ease. In spite of this record, the march across the Sebkra was too much for a great many men. Most of the heavy clothing was shedded; some heavy equipment was abandoned.

The south side of the lake was reached about noon. Later on in the afternoon a radio operator picked up a message from Lt Col Johnny Walker, who was in command of an armored unit. The message stated that the Tafaroui airfield was already under American control. It was requested that some men be

(16) B-3, p. 35-39

sent as quickly as possible to guard the prisoners.

It was decided that Company "E" would be loaded on three planes and flown to the airdrome. By pooling all available fuel, three airplanes were about all that could be put into the air. About ten minutes after take off the three C-47's were jumped by four Dewoitine 520's, a crafty little French fighter that mounted a 20-mm cannon and four small caliber machine guns. All three transports were severely sprayed and were forced to crash land in the desert. The company suffered a loss of about twenty casualties. The remainder of the company including many who were badly wounded completed the trek on foot to Tarefoui. (17) The men had seen their first blood and were now riled and ready for action. A few of the wounded became too weak, from the loss of blood, to continue to march and had to be carried by those who were able. (18) When the drop zone near the Tarefoui airfield was examined, it was discovered that it was entirely covered by artillery and automatic fire. It is generally believed that the enemy knew what was coming. (18A)

TUNISIA

As soon as the operations around Algiers, Oran, and Casablanca were completed it was decided by the Allied Force Commander to press rapidly on Tunisia. It was known that an excellent airfield was located near the Tunisian border at Youks les Bains. Another field of lesser importance was located

(17) B-3, p. 40-42; (18) Personal; (18A) B-3, p. 46

at nearby Tebessa. Both airdromes were approximately 400 miles beyond the farthest advance of any American force in the direction of Tunisia. The next mission for the 509th Battalion was to seize and hold the Tebessa airfield to deny its use to the enemy. (19)

The plans for the new mission were very different to those made for the mission at Oran. All the plans made for the seizure of the important airdrome can practically be summed up in one sentence stated by the Commanding Officer.

"Be loaded on your planes by dawn and follow me." (20)

As stated before, the orders issued by General Anderson, Commanding General of the British First Army, then charged with ground operations in Tunisia, stated that the Tebessa airdrome would be seized. There was only one map of the general area available in Army Headquarters at the time.

When the parachute battalion commander returned to the unit which had moved up to the Maison Blanc Airdrome near Algiers, a slight change was made. From a conversation with two Frenchmen, who were familiar with the area around Tebessa, it was learned that a larger and much more important airfield was located near Youks les Bains. The Battalion Commander produced an old French flying map and asked the Frenchmen to mark the location of the Youks Airfield. The Frenchmen drew a small square on the side of the Constantine-Tebessa road. This small square represented the sole information available

(19) B-7, p. 4, B-3, p. 53; (20) Personal and B-7, p.4

to the Battalion Commander, the pilots, and the jump masters in locating the DZ for the objective. The First Army Commander agreed that both airdromes must be denied for use by the Axis upon receiving the information of the location of the Youks Airfield. (21)

At 0800 hours on the 15th of November 1942, 33 C-47 transports took off from the Maison Blanche Airdrome with the very much understrength battalion. No one knew what to expect. It was known to be very possible that German parachutists could be defending the airfield; if not Germans, the French would certainly be there--whether they would be hostile or friendly was another question. The altitude of the airfield was believed to be approximately 3000 feet--an altitude at which the air is too thin to retard the rapid descent of parachutists. No assembly areas were selected. Not even a weather report was available. The men were simply told not to fire unless fired upon as the planes roared on toward the objective. Six fighter aircraft were dispatched as escort for the transports.

As a matter of luck the pilots did find the objective. As the troops left the door of the plane they could see a strong net work of trenches occupied by men manning weapons on the ground below. The chutists silently floated down and landed on the open flat airfield where the guns of a French Battalion supported by 75-MM artillery covered every square foot. No fire was delivered by either side, and in a short time, two very important airfields were secured and the confidence of a

(21) B-3, p. 53-54.

relatively powerful force of French troops won for the allies. (22)

On the ground, the airborne troops began to play the same role as any other light infantry unit; the term "light infantry" is used because parachute troops cannot carry the supplies and equipment that a standard infantry unit can carry. Very little supporting fires are available to parachutists while engaged in parachute missions. The parachute battalion had landed some 450 miles forward of friendly troops and supply bases; in terrain about which very little was known. The location or disposition of the enemy was unknown. Such luxuries as blankets, hot food, changes of clothing and transportation were not available. (23) The battalion was set up on defensive positions around the airfield. The only Germans encountered during the first few days was a lone Junkers 88 bomber that circled the Tebessa Field at about 1000 feet. The field was then defended by Company "E". The small arms of the company brought the plane down. A few days later all parachutists except Company "E" were sent back to Algiers. The enemy was finally encountered in several sharp clashes by Company "E" and other small units that were brought up from Algiers. In order to understand the small unit actions to be discussed, it is necessary to understand the terrain in Southern Tunisia and the enemy situation in general.

(22) B-7, p. 4; (23) Personal

The strategic plan of squeezing the German Armies out of Africa was working out ahead of schedule. The expedition that landed in Casablanca and the British Eighth Army which started from Alamein were to gradually work toward each other and annihilate the German Armies in between. (25) Small German detachments were encountered in Southern Tunisia as early as 21 November 1943. It was not determined whether or not these detachments were forward reconnaissance troops of Rommels Africa Corps.

Tunisia is divided in half by a high mountain ridge which runs southward from Pont DU Fahs for some 150 miles to Maknassy and then southwest for a further 50 miles to Where, about 20 miles south of El Guettar, it joins the line of great Chotts or salt lakes. There are only four main road passes through the mountain ridge. They are located at El Guettar, Maknassy, Faïd and Fondouk. The mountain range forms a natural defensive barrier against any attacker from the east and the lakes form a barrier to any southern approach. East of the mountain lies the Coastal Plain which is relatively open and flat except for a few oasis and olive orchards. This is the area open to German forces. To the west of the mountain range are the high plains with somewhat less cover and vegetation. The American forces were free to operate in the area west of the mountains. (26)

The French forces scattered throughout Southern Tunisia had very crude forms of material and equipment. Army vehicles were all types of worn out civilian, army and confiscated cars and trucks. The communication consisted mainly of telephone

wire between the major towns in the area. A French Intelligence Agent was located in almost every town. (27)

GAFSA

On 21 November 1942 it was reported by the French intelligence source that an enemy force was advancing toward Gafsa, which was about 100 miles from Youks Les Bains. (28) One platoon of Company "D" had previously entered Gafsa and had detonated 70,000 gallons of high Octane gasoline which belonged to the French. Intelligence reports indicated that a strong enemy column was approaching Gafsa. The very much needed fuel was destroyed in order to deny its use to the enemy. The platoon had withdrawn from Gafsa with the opinion that the city was shortly to be occupied by strong enemy forces.

Colonel Raff, the parachute Battalion Commander, was authoritative and aggressive. To let an enemy force, strong or weak, sit in Gafsa without at least being disturbed, was not to his satisfaction. He immediately began making plans to seize Gafsa. The attacking force was organized and consisted of the following: Company "E" the parachute company, one infantry company (which had been flown into the Youks les Bains Airdrome as reinforcements for the paratroops); Company "B" of the 701st TD Battalion which had just arrived by road from Algiers via Constantine; a small detachment of The Chasseur d' Afr que on motorcycles and armored cars and four P-38 air-

(27) B-3 Ch 14; (28) B-7, p. 8

craft. Transportation for the attacking force was gathered from several official and unofficial sources.

The Provisional Task Force departed from Youks les Bains about dark and reached the vicinity of Gafsa about dawn the following morning. It was considered very probable that enemy air power would attack at daybreak, due to German air superiority in the area. The column spread out behind the hills about a mile from the city. The terrain between the hills and Gafsa is bare and level except for a few erosion cuts.

At exactly one minute to seven, four P-38's burst into view and strafed the enemy positions. Under cover of the strafing aircraft, the tank destroyers moved across the open ground with the foot troops following closely behind. As the P-38's disappeared the tank destroyers and infantry encountered machine gun and rifle fire. The 75-mm guns, the 50 caliber machine guns and the 37-mm antitank guns plus small arms fire from the infantry troops proved to be too hot for the German forces. Most of the enemy's machine guns and antitank weapons were knocked out in the first phase of the fight. The enemy withdrew and Gafsa fell to the Allies. (29)

EL GUETTAR

Immediately after the occupation of Gafsa, a French motorcycle patrolman rushed up to Headquarters and reported that a French armored car had contacted enemy tanks followed

(29) B-3, p. 100-102

by an armored column was approaching El Guettar. El Guettar was a small oasis town only twelve miles beyond Gafsa (see Map C). Colonel Raff ordered the tank destroyers and infantry to "mount up" and the column proceeded toward El Guettar. The reconnaissance unit, mounted on 1/4-ton trucks ^{which} were fired upon by enemy tanks as they neared the oasis. One enemy tank at a range of approximately 3000 yards exposed itself momentarily while trying to improve its firing position. Lt Edson, a platoon leader of the tank destroyer battalion knocked the tanks out with an AP shell from his 75-mm self propelled gun. Another tank appeared and was hit almost immediately. All the other tanks made a hasty withdrawal into El Guettar with the tank destroyers and paratroops in close pursuit. The engagement was called to a halt due to the approach of darkness and the tank destroyer--infantry team was ordered back to Gafsa. Five enemy medium tanks were destroyed and four were abandoned by the enemy about 20 miles beyond El Guettar due to mechanical failure caused by hits received in the battle. (30)

From French Headquarters in Bou Chebka, near Tebessa, came the report that an enemy column consisting of 15 tanks, six truck-towed 88-mm guns plus some motorized infantry had reached Sbiletla. This meant that if the column continued it would very quickly reach Thelepte and the French were almost positive that the column would turn north toward Tebessa. (See Map C) (31)

(30) B-3, p. 107-109; (31) B-3, p. 106

A small force of tank destroyers and one platoon of paratroopers was organized and ordered to proceed to Ferianna with the mission to destroy all enemy tanks in the vicinity of Telepte. The column started out about 1000 or shortly after the engagement at El Guettar. The paratroops were almost exhausted from approximately two day maneuvering and fighting without rest or sleep. The rations consisted of the "K" type. The tank destroyers were badly in need of maintenance in that no attention had been given them since the vehicles departed from Algiers for Tunisia. The force proceeded toward Ferianna arriving about 0200 the following morning. No enemy was encountered. The troops were able to get about four hours of much needed rest. (32)

SBIETLA

At dawn, the troops somewhat refreshed, continued the search for the enemy column. No sign was seen of any enemy as they passed through Thelepte going toward Sbeitla. The vicinity of Sbeitla was reached at approximately mid-day. The column was halted and a patrol was sent forward. The patrol returned with the report that enemy activity was observed in and around Sbeitla. Enemy infantry were seen digging in on the reverse slope just at the edge of town.

Captain Ellman, Company Commander of the tank destroyer company, saw the advantage of a quick attack and ordered the tank destroyers to lead the attack and the paratroops to follow

(32) B-3, p. 109

closely behind. As the attack was launched over the top of a ridge and down the slope to the partially dug-in positions, about every gun the enemy had opened fire. Enemy light tanks appeared from behind the city and opened fire. One-half track tank destroyer was hit and stopped. Lt Edson again distinguished himself by taking over as gunner and knocking out two light tanks from the stalled vehicle. The paratroops and tank destroyers made a very bold advance with fire and movement straight toward the enemy positions. As soon as the attacker's were within accurate firing distance of the enemy positions, white flags began to appear. The attackers proceeded with caution, and fired just enough to keep the enemy down. As the positions were reached the enemy began filing out of their fox holes to surrender. A few enemy machine gunners continued firing after the majority of the others had surrendered. They could not see and did not know the status of the battle due to the practice of lying prone in a protective trench and only expose one hand to reach up and pull the trigger. The result was that, almost all the enemy machine gun fire was fired into empty space and was most ineffective.

The Sbeitla engagement proved to be very beneficial to the small force of American troops. Approximately one hundred prisoners were captured and 12 light tanks destroyed. The booty consisted of all the weapons for an entire company with stores of ammunition and hand grenades. The items praised

most highly by the paratroops were food and wine. The enemy company kitchen was seized just about the time the noon meal was ready to serve, Two practically new enemy trucks and a large stack of blankets plus a store of rations were additional prizes for the paratroops. With plenty of good food, some sleep with blankets to keep warm, and transportation, the morale of Company "E" was lifted considerably. Everyone became aggressive and was more determined to "have it out" with the enemy. (33) Sbietla was turned over to a unit of French troops for defense and the paratroop--tank destroyer team was pulled back to Ferianna. Colonel Raff had established a command post in Ferianna and had assembled a force to be used as a mobile reserve. French troops were used to defend Gafsa, Sbietla and other important points in the area. There was no established line between the friendly and enemy forces. Had there been a line, the small handful of American and enemy forces could have occupied but a small fraction of it. The mobile reserve was organized solely for hit and run clashes with the enemy, to keep him off balance, confused, and to keep him from occupying and fortifying at any certain point. The enemy certainly believed the opposing force to be much stronger than it actually was. It was hard for the enemy to believe that the troops encountered at El Guettar were the same troops that beat them the very next

(33) B-3, p. 111

day in Sbietla. To the mobile reserve was added one battalion from the 26th Infantry commanded by Lt Col Bowen. (34)

FAID PASS

Faid Pass (see Map D), one of the four main doors through the mountain range (see Map C, D), into Allied territory was the next scene of action. The enemy had occupied the important pass for several days and was believed to be pretty strongly fortified. With the use of patrols and from Arabs and French intelligence sources it was learned that the camel trail pass called Ain Rebou five miles south of Faid Pass was heavily mined but not occupied.

It was decided to attack on 3 December 1942. The plan in brief, was as follows: The tank destroyers with infantry would move under cover of darkness through Ain Rebou Pass and move along the eastern base of the mountains and attack the enemy from the rear. The light platoon of tank destroyers with 37-mm guns was to protect the rear and the right flank. It was believed the element of surprise would be completely achieved. Just before the attack began, a company of Algerian Tirailleurs was attached to the force. (35)

The mines were removed from Ain Rebou Pass and the entire force passed through during the night of 2 December 1942. A French guide was employed to find the eastern end of Faid Pass for the attackers. Some difficulty was encountered in locating

(34) B-3, p. 113, 127. Personal; (35) B-3, p. 126, 128

the exact spot during darkness and daylight caught the attacking forces in the open and within artillery range of the defenders. Surprise was lost. The enemy held off the attack by fire until his position was changed for defense from both east and west. The quick blow on the enemy turned out to be a slow and difficult attack. (36) Company "E" of paratroops were brought up as a reserve to be used in a possible night attack. (37)

The battle for the Pass continued for three days without much progress. Most of the enemy artillery and mortars were destroyed and a night attempt to resupply by air indicated that the enemy were getting low on ammunition and supplies. One bold attempt was made by the enemy to resupply the position in daylight. About a squadron of Ju 88 bombers were used to bomb and strafe the allied force, while a supply column moved down the main highway to the pass. The 50 caliber machine gun mounted on the half tracks proved to be considerably effective against the aircraft. The planes were driven off before the resupply column could reach the pass. The column was forced to retreat. Although the plan to resupply failed, the enemy aircraft did heavy damage to the attacking troops and equipment.

At 1500 on the fourth day it was decided that a coordinated attack would be made on the pass. A French artillery battalion was placed in position east of the pass. The infantry battalion

(36) B-3, p. 132-133; (37) B-3, p. 133

commanded by Lt Col Bowen had been successful in working north up the ridge of mountains to within about 400 yards of the enemy positions. A company of fresh Algerian Tirailleurs were in position to assault up the west side of the mountain chain and the parachute company on the east side. The foot troops moved from covered positions in the foot hills under a heavy artillery and mortar barrage across the open ground toward the enemy positions. Machine gun and rifle fire from the heights overlooking the enemy position was delivered by Colonel Bowen's battalion. The supporting fires were so intense and effective that the paratroopers and the Tirailleurs were able to advance within 50 yards of the enemy positions without receiving any effective fire. As the supporting fires lifted, the assault was made with bayonets and grenades. The enemy was quickly overwhelmed and Faid Pass fell to the Allies. Allied losses totalled about one hundred killed and wounded. About 200 enemy, mostly members of Rommel's Afrika Corps were captured. The responsibility for the defense of pass was turned over to French troops.

With the fall of Faid Pass all routes through to the mountain range in Southern Tunisia belonged to the Allies. The security of these mountain passes was essential to Rommel's Afrika Corps for a successful retreat up the eastern coast of Tunisia. The passes were equally important to Allied forces because without them no attack could be made on axis forces farther to the east.

With the use of a small number of paratroops, important airfields in Southern Tunisia were secured; French troops were contacted and found to be friendly, all important passes leading into Southern Tunisia were seized and the whole of Southern Tunisia west of the range of mountains was made secure for future Allied operations. (38)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing the operations discussed in this monograph, it is easy to point out errors made by the 509th Parachute Battalion that were made purely due to the absence of experience in combat. Since the battalion was the first parachute unit to be committed in the history of the army, a great many ideas were tried for the first time, and the ideas or principles that were workable and sound were handed down to other airborne units for succeeding operations.

It was determined that a parachute operation requires a very detailed amount of training, planning and rehearsals with both the parachute unit and the troop carrier unit. If the pilots, who made the flight from England to Africa had been proficient in night flying over strange territory, the Parachute Battalion would not have been scattered over a wide area on the morning of 8 November 1942. If all personnel of an airborne unit are not delivered to the proper place, the effect on the combat efficiency of the unit can be compared

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to that of an infantry unit that has already been "cut to ribbons" from previous employment. Troop carrier units should definitely rehearse their particular phase of all airborne missions.

Security measures must be doubly stressed when planning for an airborne attack. Every known security caution was taken in the training and planning phases of the African invasion; yet, it is believed the enemy was aware that the mission was coming off. The drop zones to be used were well defended with machine gun and artillery fire. It is believed that the mission had little chance of success even if the Air Corps had made the proper delivery.

Every important point in the operation was well covered during the preparation and training phase, but in the operation itself there was no alternate plan. Arrangements should have been made to warn the battalion while in the air that the war plan was in effect instead of the peace plan. The personnel should have been instructed in what to do in case of becoming lost and forced to land at separate locations.

The distance of fifteen hundred miles is too great for successful airborne operations. Arrangements should have been made to shuttle the battalion to Gibraltar and the operation conducted from there. Long distances causes a higher margin for errors and brings about unexpected conditions. The 509th Battalion was moved from a cool, humid climate overnight to an extremely hot and dry climate. The necessary changes in

dress of the troops were not made. A very large percentage of the men became casualties in the Sebkra due to climatic change.

Troop carrier aircraft are very vulnerable to enemy air attack. Fighter escort should always be used when moving by air into enemy terrain during daylight. Had there been proper fighter escort, Company "E" would not have been shot down by enemy fighters in the desert.

The quick use of airborne troops to secure the airfields and key terrain features in Tunisia contributed immensely to the speedy ending of these Tunisian Campaigns. If the enemy had contained the important objectives in Southern Tunisia first, the whole campaign would have been prolonged. Airborne troops proved to be very valuable for quick and unforeseen actions, and for use against objectives well out of range of ground units.

When on the ground, parachute units are not as strong as similar ground units. The lack of transportation facilities, supporting arms and resupply makes parachute units incapable of sustained combat. The health of the men in Company "E" in Tunisia was greatly affected because of the lack of adequate food and protective facilities. The lack of food caused conditions such as dysentery, bad teeth, and low morale. The lack of shelter, bedding, and changes of shoes and clothing accounted for many of the colds, parasites and diseases common in the unit. A more extraneous effort should have been made in caring for the men's welfare.

The attack of Gafsa with the coordinated efforts of armor, infantry, and air was a good example of the necessity for the combined cooperation of the various arms. The small scale attack proved that coordination can be achieved at a low level and with small units.

The bold attacks made by Company "E" against the enemy over long distances contributed favorably in keeping the enemy in a state of confusion and entirely off balance. The practice of attacking at dusk in El Guettar and at dawn in Sbietla confused the enemy into believing the attacking force was strong, and made him enlarge his commitments.

The enemy failed to realize the importance of covering his mine fields by fire in the defense of Faid. The use of lines alone will not guard anything. Our troops successfully removed the mines at Ain Rebou Pass and attacked the enemy from the rear. The element of surprise would have been achieved in the attack of the enemy rear at Faid if the unit had been experience in night movements. The objective was not reached before light appeared and consequently the enemy was permitted to shift his positions for defense to the rear.

Although the units discussed in this monograph made many errors and suffered several unnecessary losses, the results achieved were profitable. The lessons learned were extremely valuable in subsequent airborne operations.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Airborne units and troop carrier units must closely coordinate training and preparations for an airborne operation.
2. A greater emphasis on security measures is necessary for airborne operations than for regular infantry operations.
3. Air assaults over vast distances are extremely difficult to carry out, and the acute climatic changes must be compensated for.
4. Troops should not be allowed to move by air during daylight in enemy terrain without adequate escort by fighter aircraft.
5. It is necessary that several alternate plans be made in planning for an airborne operation. If the first plan does not work, there is no chance to call a halt and reconsider.
6. Airborne troops are very effective for the rapid seizure of important installations or key terrain features.
7. The use of armor-infantry teams with air cooperation can be achieved at a low level in organization.
8. Airborne troops are not equipped for sustained combat unless the necessary heavy equipment is brought forward after the drop.
9. The bold attack is often the payoff against superior forces. When the unexpected is achieved, the enemy is usually confused.
10. "Green troops" became combat adapted very quickly when subjected to enemy fire.